

10 April 2002

The Honorable Scott McInnis
Chairman
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Committee on Resources

Dear Honorable Chairman and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to voice my support for H.R. 3962. My name is Craig McCurry and I am a County Commissioner representing Elmore County, Idaho. I am here on behalf of the Elmore County Board of County Commissioners and the Idaho Association of Counties (IAC). Elmore County is home to almost 30,000 people and Mountain Home Air Force Base.

Elmore County and IAC applaud the efforts of Congress to address the fundamental issue of land acquisition by the federal government and ask for your overwhelming support of H.R. 3962. H.R. 3962, the "Good Neighbor Act of 2002", presents an excellent opportunity to minimize the impacts of land acquisition on the forty-four counties in Idaho and the countless counties around the nation affected by the federal land in their county. We appreciate the actions of Idaho's Congressional Delegation, especially Congressman Otter, to begin a much-needed discussion of land acquisition by the federal government.

The position of the Idaho Association of Counties, of which Elmore County is a member, has always been that:

"Federal and state real property holdings should be maintained at a minimum level. Acquisition of new land by a federal or state agency should be subject to...the agreement of the county within which the property is located. If additional...acquisitions are necessary, and agreed to, local political subdivisions should be compensated for lands and/or facilities so acquired" (Idaho Association of Counties Public Lands Book 2001).

The federal government currently owns sixty-two percent (62%) of Idaho, placing us third in the nation for federal land ownership. Elmore County is sixty-seven percent (67%) federally owned. Federal lands, although positive in some aspects, do negatively impact the gateway communities surrounding the federal land. The acquisition of federal lands causes a property tax shift to our citizens, who are already facing difficult economic times.

Tourism is not the panacea some think it might be. In addition to providing services to their residents within the confines of a tight budget – Idaho counties are subject to budget limitations - counties must also bear the additional costs of providing services to the non-residents recreating on federal land, whether it be road upkeep or search and rescue, all without full funding of Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT). In the last fiscal year, Idaho received only 59% of what Congress is authorized to appropriate for PILT. Elmore County received a little over \$1 million in PILT for fiscal year 2001, more than \$760,000 less than authorized. This payment of \$1 million, a tax payment for 67% of the county is only 10% of our current budget. The tax shift that represents to the citizens is obvious. Let me say that even if Congress did fund PILT at the full authorization level, it would still be less than what could be generated if the lands were on the tax rolls. Additionally, if private citizens owned these lands, they would have no choice but to pay their taxes. Congress should meet their tax obligation prior to engaging in "discretionary spending."

To add insult to injury, after recommending cutting the PILT budget by \$45 million, the President's proposal calls for approximately \$531 million for land acquisition. It is the fundamental belief of Elmore County and the Idaho Association of Counties that the federal government should not acquire more lands until it fulfills its responsibility to the land it already owns, by fully-funding PILT and using proper management techniques to ensure the health of that federal land. A great number of Elmore County residents make their living off the land and wish these lands preserved for generations to come. The federal government has a responsibility to protect the lands currently under its jurisdiction prior to taking more off the tax rolls.

Let me take a moment to thank you to those of you that have supported PILT increases in the past and we hope that you would continue to do so in the future.

One example of the impact of federal lands on a county budget is apparent in how much time and resources is needed to cover the search and rescue and law enforcement needs of those public lands. In a slow year, Elmore County's Sheriff Department spends at least \$15,000 each year on search and rescue services and is usually rebuffed by the federal agencies when asking for assistance, whether it be the use of a helicopter or some financial reimbursement. The Forest Service pays the Sheriff's Department \$16,000 a year to patrol the forest service lands within my county. That comes nowhere close to full reimbursement for services provided. The County Sheriff also helps maintain and patrol the waterways within our county. Not only do the federal agencies not offer labor or resources to perform those services, the federal agencies charge campground fees and the county never sees any of those revenues. Our citizens appreciate the opportunity to recreate close to home but are tired of carrying the financial burden for the non-residents traveling to Elmore County to enjoy all we have to offer.

H.R. 3962 is not perfect, nor does it solve all of our problems, but it does offer opportunities to improve upon the current system. H.R. 3962 limits the acquisition of land by the federal government in counties in which the federal government owns 50% or more of the acreage within that county by requiring an almost equal land trade. Of the forty-four counties in Idaho, 22 are more than 50% federal lands. This legislation also prevents the federal government from acquiring land, without the permission of local decision-makers, within counties that are currently 66% or more federally owned. Twelve counties in Idaho are more than 66% federal ownership.

One of the crucial aspects of this legislation is the cooperation and consultation with local governments. Local government officials are closest to the people and to the community they serve and should be an integral part of the discussion of any action by the federal government affecting their county. Local government officials are currently treated as stakeholders and not as elected officials with the statutory responsibility to provide for the health, safety and welfare of the citizens within their boundaries. It is essential that we are part of the discussion process when decisions are made affecting our constituents.

Thank you for the opportunity to voice our support for H.R. 3962. It is our desire that the federal government work toward becoming a good neighbor by taking this opportunity to right a wrong. The passage of H.R. 3962 would represent an auspicious occasion for the counties in America with federal lands within their borders. Thank you for your exemplary service to this great nation.

Sincerely,

Craig McCurry
Elmore County Commissioner